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ABSTRACT

Impromptu speech is heard only once, at a rate of perception that depends on the speaker's delivery, and is specifically adapted to the listeners. These features trigger cognitive activities that facilitate translation. Impromptu speech is characterized by a constant interconnection between cognitive competence and language competence and between sound (prosodic, syntactic, and lexical features) and sense. A written text delivered orally does not have these characteristics and diminishes the listener's cognitive awareness. Impromptu delivery is characterized by the emission of sounds reflecting the speakers' thinking process; this is one of the major reasons that impromptu speech is easier to understand than prepared speech, and it is the reason that oral interpreters insist on speakers' speaking extemporaneously. (MSE)

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IMPROMPTU SPEECH
AND ORAL TRANSLATION

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Impromptu speech and oral translation

For the oral translator (or interpreter) there are three types of discourse: (1) written texts that are normally dealt with in writing but have sometimes to be translated orally (sight translation), (2) written texts read out at international conferences, and (3) impromptu speeches. I shall disregard sight translation and deal only with aural translation, i.e. impromptu speeches and speeches read out from manuscripts. To the interpreter the difference between the two is tremendous. Impromptu speech is readily understood and translated, while prepared speeches make greater demands on him and prove less amenable to successful rendering. This is mainly due to speech production: words delivered from a prepared text come from the conversion of visual perception to sounds, while word sequences delivered in impromptu speech are generated by the thinking activity that goes on in the speaker's mind.

In this paper I shall examine various features of impromptu speeches that are shown by translation to be connected not only with language but also with the speaker's and the listener's cognitive activities. I shall also endeavor to show that extemporaneity has an influence both on enunciation and formulation.

Impromptu speech is communication and has therefore to be considered in its interactive effects with receptors. In impromptu speech *prosodics* play a more prominent role than in prepared speeches, and add a great deal to the meaning, the sound patterns we connect with *syntactic rules* are not always as expected, but what to the grammarians would appear as deviances are to the interpreter clues to the speaker's meandering thoughts. The sounds of *lexical items* merge within the auditory verbal span: this means that there is hardly any possibility of individual identification prior to the understanding of a sense entity, so that the ambiguity of individual words or clauses is avoided. Finally non-linguistic carriers of sense such as *mimics and gestures* are abundantly present in impromptu speech, sometimes even outweighing the semantic components of speech in determining sense for the hearer. But

differences do not stop here, and I shall deal mainly with the following: impromptu speech is *heard only once*, at a rate of perception that depends on the *speaker's delivery*, and it is specifically *adapted to the listeners*. All these features trigger off cognitive activities that facilitate translation.

Oral translation

Studies of interpretation have shown that in adequate oral translation the sounds issued by a speaker are processed by the interpreter with a cognitive result that is largely non -verbal. Understanding results in an awareness of non-verbal sense, and translating consists in putting that sense into words in another language, some direct passage from word to word occurs, but no oral translation is ever carried out as a whole on a word-to-word basis. The non-verbal character of sense is testifies by the fact that consecutive interpreters sometimes happen to forget which language they heard, so that instead of translating they start rewording the speech in the same language. Lederer (1976) has termed 'units of sense' the successive conceptual entities produced in auditory memory that gradually build up into a coherent discourse.

Let us take as an example of translation under such conditions an utterance made by the President of the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation: "Thomas Alva Edison was a pragmatist and a realist. In working with the incandescent lamp, his aim was to produce light in a more convenient form and at a lower cost than the gas utilities of his time could. He figured to the penny the cost of providing a single gas flame in a single home and made that his target for electric lighting.

That kind of economic realism, coupled with creativity and a willingness to take risks"...

and its French oral translation.

"Thomas Alva Edison était homme d'action et réaliste. En travaillant à la mise au point de sa lampe incandescente, il cherchait à produire une lumière moins coûteuse et d'emploi plus commode que celle fournie par le gaz. Il avait évalué au centime près le coût par bec de gaz et par foyer de l'éclairage au gaz et entendait ne pas le dépasser.

Ce réalisme économique, doublé d'un esprit d'invention et du courage de prendre des risques..."

Here is the last sentence again:

That kind of economic realism, *coupled* with *creativity* and *a willingness to take risks*...

(French). Ce réalisme économique, *doublé* d'un *esprit d'invention* et du *courage de prendre des risques*...

Obviously the French here is the result of breaking up a cognitive awareness that is non-verbal: *esprit d'invention* does not derive directly from *creativity*, nor *doublé* from *coupled* or *courage* from *willingness*. The process does not involve a word-for-word substitution but an interpretation drawing on the whole of the linguistic and non-verbal knowledge that is temporarily stored as a cognitive trace in the mind.

Impromptu speech is *heard only once;* it either fails to awaken any sense, leaving one only with a faint impression of the man who spoke while the sounds he uttered fade away or it puts across a message. There are varying degrees to which a message may be understood, but what is left behind after language has disappeared is always a cognitive trace; and this is shown by translation. The *rate of delivery* of impromptu speech is adjusted to the shaping of sense in the speaker's mind and consequently to the way his mind works. He aims at communicating; his delivery therefore depends on the way ideas and emotions surge and not on deliberate focusing on enunciation. His listeners' understanding is in line with his own.

In the case of prepared speeches, it requires a good actor for delivery to match the cognitive and emotional activities that take place spontaneously in an impromptu speaker's mind. Otherwise the presentation is poorly adapted prosodically, too slow or too hurried. In some cases the delivery of prepared texts is so slow that the hearer's mind lingers on on individual words, summoning up various meanings and losing the thread of ideas. This happens sometimes in reading: the reader's uptake of information is done at his own rhythm. Unlike auditory perception that has to cling to the speaker's rate of delivery or lose track of what he is saying, eye perception can isolate series of words and cut them off from their verbal and cognitive context; the mind can toy with them as it wishes and, while the cognitive awareness of entities fades away, multiple language meanings appear. Writers often make use of

this kind of specificity of sight perception to load their writing with double or triple meanings.

When a written text is being oralized, delivery is often too quick, leaving no time for the sense to be fully grasped, as hardly any cognitive associations occur, or, if they do in places, it will be at the expense of other passages in the speech.

The lack of impromptuness in delivery diminishes the listener's cognitive awareness in a commensurate way with the speaker's. Adequate delivery, i.e. an emission of sounds that reflects the thinking process in the speaker's mind, is one of the major reasons why impromptu speech is easier to understand than prepared speech and why interpreters always insist on speakers speaking extemporaneously.

Adjustment to audience and cognitive complements

Adjustment to the audience is a characteristic of here-and-now utterances; they develop along a pattern which takes into account the time and place of delivery and supposes that topical knowledge is largely shared by the audience.

Impromptu speech is highly planned cognitively; we know what we want to impart before opening our mouths to speak; however, the individual units of sense are not planned, neither sequentially nor in their individual composition, but shaped in accordance with the feel we get of our audience. Our speech adjusts linearly to our interlocutors; we see them, we react to their mimics; we dwell on the points which seem to be poorly understood, while omitting shared knowledge where repetition would be tiresome. We are aware at a preconscious level not only of our listeners' knowledge of language but also of their knowledge of relevant information pertaining to the subject under discussion, and we fit our words into that knowledge; we adjust the degree of explicitness to the degree of familiarity with the information we expect from our listeners, we choose our words in accordance with circumstances – festive or mundane, we adapt them to our social status vis à vis our interlocutors – giving instructions or asking for them, etc...

The speaker expects to find not only knowledge of language but also general and background knowledge into which to fit his words and this is matched on the listener's side by the intuitive feeling that he cannot under-

stand speech on the basis of language competence alone but that he will also need topical knowledge. Lederer (1976) and myself (1976, 1977) have repeatedly shown that extra-linguistic information has to be added to semantics to produce a sense and is necessary for a speech to be translatable. The role of such *cognitive complements* can be made clear in situations where a by-stander observes impromptu speech without being involved in it; it then appears clearly that we communicate only when language and cognition merge.

The greatest difficulty for translators is to muster the necessary cognitive complements, the lack of which is far more thwarting than the lack of a lexical item here or there to which verbal context usually lends a meaning. Here is an instance of an utterance which cannot be correctly translated even though its language can be understood, because cognitive complements are missing. These are the first words, obviously impromptu, of a speech by President Carter: "My instructions were to be here at three o'clock, and I think I am right on time. But I think you all know that I've been providing employment for the Attorney General for the last two years or so – as a favor to the people of Georgia (laughter) – and the country –, and I think to keep him busy for a few minutes is not out of keeping with our relationship in the last few months."

We understand the language but the utterance does not make sense, as evidenced by the fact that no reader of this text would have laughed at the point shown as having actually raised laughter. We fail to understand this act of speech because we are unable to rely on anything but our linguistic competence while speeches imply as much if not more than they state explicitly.

Explicit wording is only the tip of an iceberg the main body of which is not visible, yet very much present in the speaker's and in the listener's minds. All speech acts emerge from a body of knowledge that remains unsaid and merge at the other end of the communication chain with the listener's knowledge and experience. Meaningfulness of speech is not only dependent on the characteristics of speech as such, it is also contingent upon the speaker's adjustment to his audience's knowledge and on the listener's ability to make sense out of the sounds he receives.

The adjustment of speech to audience is particularly noticeable in impromptu speech where the speaker – hearer relationship is an intimate one; situational perception is implied by the speaker and taken into account by the listener; impromptu speech is not autonomous, but part of a series of

verbal exchanges where a large amount of common cognitive memories accumulate, constituting a cognitive context implied by the speaker and summoned by the listener. The merging of utterances with cognitive context and general knowledge contrives to produce sense. In human translation this sense gives rise to none of the difficulties experienced by machine translation which, as it deals only with language, finds it difficult to distinguish between identical syntactic structures such as *He washed the dishes with Omo* and *He washed the dishes with Susan*. In the human mind the words merge with background knowledge and the relevant meaning appears spontaneously.

Ambiguities

Some psychologists and linguists claim that speech is ambiguous because language is ambiguous; they say that words crop up in utterances with all their facets of meaning and that irrelevant ones have to be rejected on the basis of context. I submit that the claim should be reversed; there are no random ambiguities in speech acts; the dynamics of impromptu speech are such that utterances carry unequivocal sense; ambiguities are artefacts introduced into speech acts post factum, because all the parameters that distinguish them from language in isolation have been eliminated. By this I mean that in impromptu speech additional, cognitive information is available, there is a single issuance of speech and the rate of delivery is such that no trace is left of the actual words spoken. When these are removed, ambiguity is created. Words and sentences in isolation are always equivocal, while speech carries unequivocal sense as long as it is treated as speech and not as language. Let me take as an example an event at my office at Paris University. I am trying to reach the Head of another Department over the phone in order to settle an administrative point raised by the student sitting opposite me; hearing the reply I put down the phone and turn to the student saying: *"The secretary says she is sick"*. My utterance is perfectly clear to him, because it merges with situational awareness, i.e. with knowledge that is either already stored in his memory (he knows I am trying to reach a female colleague) – or is being perceived together with the utterance (I am putting down the phone without further inquiries); he understands I could not get her so when he hears: *"she is sick"* he knows to whom this refers. Had the sentence been analysed in isolation, three possible interpretations might have been given.

1) A (female) says X (female) is sick;
2) A (female) says she herself is sick;
3) B (male) says X (female) is sick.

It might be argued that my student was unaware of the sex of the person I was talking to over the phone so that *secretary* did remain ambiguous. In fact neither of the two possible genders of *secretary* was activated; the only part of the semantic potential attached to *secretary* that reached him was the function of a person who answers the phone.

Language ambiguity remains unnoticed in speech; here, there is simply no awareness of sex, translation would have made this perfectly clear: *"On me dit qu'elle est malade."* Language as described – speech as used.

Little discussion is devoted by psychologists and linguists to the dissociation of sounds and mental contents in utterances, the prevailing view being apparently that sounds, whether perceived in speeches or in isolation, always call for the same semantic contents. Language meanings and speech meanings are identified, English sounds are supposed to be producing English semantics, French sounds French semantics, with all attached shades of meaning, polysemy and ambiguity; nothing detracted from and nothing added to semantics.

I have repeatedly tried to show (Seleskovitch 1976, 1977, 1980) that this view, based on the unsupported evidence that speaking and understanding is an application of language competence only, is untenable. The evidence of oral translation is that speech sounds arise from mental associations between on the one hand proprioceptive and exteroceptive stimuli and on the other verbal and non-verbal memories, and that they arouse more sense in the listener than the sound/concept association of words and phrases in isolation.

We have also shown (Seleskovitch 1975, 1980, Lederer 1981) that part of the semantic potential of words and phrases is left dormant so that there is hardly any ambiguity or polysemy left in speech.

Speech meaning (sense) adds to and detracts from language meanings (semantics). Adding speech meanings to language semantics occurs as soon as words are not used to point to concepts but to point to specific realities. Detracting from language semantics occurs as soon as words or phrases are heard in verbal or cognitive context.

Take the grapheme *coupled* for instance. As long as it remains unspecified, it has a large number of potential meanings. Word translation would divide them up into several French words: *accouplé; associé; engrené; attelé; groupé; accroché; apparié; assemblé; emmanché; raccordé; embrayé* (HARRAP's French-English dictionary). (N.B. The French lexical equivalents do, of course, contain a number of semantic features over and above the ones that equate those present in the English word. Word translation always results in some irrelevant semantic features in the original being left out, while different irrelevant features are added to the translation. In context the non-relevant features on both sides remain dormant.)

In a specific context, *coupled* loses part of its polysemy, most meanings in above listing disappear: *automatic coupling of wagons = attelage automatique*. At the same time its specificity increases its referential meaning: *the coupler* has a jaw, a head, it claws on a buffer, etc.

Translation shows that human processing of utterances is not tantamount to the processing of words or sentences in isolation. Some language will always remain unaltered in impromptu speech; *automatic coupling* is so specific that it may always be translated correctly with *attelage automatique* in a given context, but most of the time specificity will require adding from non-verbal knowledge stored in the memory. Take the phrase *the cat was run over*; its language meaning is limited as compared with the meaning the same words would have as a piece of information for the loving owner of the cat; *the cat* in that case is a ten-year old, fat, black and white tomcat, his elderly master's only companion; the denotative meaning is vastly expanded; and what a wealth of connotations are aroused!

Let us take another example, the French word *écrire* which means about the same as the English *to write*. It does not include, over and above the act of writing, the object of writing or the act of mailing the writing, and yet when we say: *Je t'ai écrit*..., unless our interlocutor lives in the same house with us, he will understand we wrote him a letter and also that we mailed it to him.

Linguistically this is described as metonymy; cognitively it is an expansion of semantic values. The lack of ambiguity of speech acts combined with their considerable cognitive extension over the semantics of language is shown by translation whenever it is done correctly.

To show how cognitive elements are added to verbal elements in the understanding of impromptu speech, I shall quote an extract from a presidential campaign speech made in 1979 by Ted Kennedy before the Democratic primaries, and show the oral translation given in interpreting class and considered as adequate. Four instances of that translation will be discussed to show how knowledge stored in non verbal memory enlarges language meanings to referential meanings (sense):

I-1-" (. . .) In fact, the Russians have dominated Afghanistan not
2-for four weeks, but for 22 months. Years ago, Afghanistan
3-passed under Soviet influence. It passed behind the iron
4-curtain, not in 1980, but in 1978, with hardly a word of
5-regret from the Carter Administration.
II-6-When *two marxist regimes in Kabul failed* to put down
7-Afghan resistance, the Russians decided to install a third
8-regime and to put down the insurgency themselves. *Afghanis-*
9-*tan, as they saw it, was slipping away*.
III-10-President Carter confessed that he was "surprised" by
11-their action. *For many months, the Administration had*
12-*ignored the warning signals.* The American Ambassador to
13-Afghanistan was killed in Kabul last February while Soviet
14-military advisers looked on. We were aware well in advance
15-that *the Russians were massing their forces.* But the Admin-
16-istration said virtually nothing until after the invasion,
17-when they drew a line in the dust that was already rising
18-from the tread of Soviet tanks".

French translation:

I-1-" (. . .) En réalité la domination des Russes sur l'Afghanis-
2-tan s'exerce depuis près de deux ans et non depuis un mois
3-seulement. Il y a des années que l'Afghanistan est dans
4-l'orbite soviétique; c'est en 1978 et non en 1980 que ce

5-pays s'est retrouvé derrière le rideau de fer sans que l'ad-
6-ministration Carter aille au-delà d'une brève oraison funèbre.
II-7-*Après les deux échecs successifs des régimes d'inspiration*
8-*marxiste* à Kaboul, les Russes décidèrent de mettre en place
9-un troisième régime et d'étouffer eux-mêmes la rébellion.
10-*Ils avaient l'impression que l'Afghanistan leur échappait.*
III-11-Le Président Carter a reconnu avoir été pris de court par
12-cette action; or, *pendant des mois le Gouvernement s'était*
13-*refusé de prendre au sérieux les avertissements* qui se mul-
14-tipliaient – Ainsi, au mois de février l'Ambassadeur améri-
15-cain en Afghanistan était-il tué à Kaboul sous les yeux
16-des conseillers militaires soviétiques. Ainsi savions-nous
17-depuis longtemps que *les Russes massaient des troupes à la*
18-*frontière – procédaient à des concentrations de troupes,*
19-mais le Gouvernement ne s'en est ému qu'après l'invasion,
20-en une protestation qui s'est perdue dans le vacarme des
21-chars soviétiques.

The role of extra-linguistic knowledge in understanding impromptu speech is apparent in translation:

English II-6 says: *"When two Marxist regimes in Kabul failed...*
French II-7: *Après les deux échecs successifs...* Everybody listening to Kennedy knew the first marxist regime in Kabul had been toppled by a second one; the sequence of time is implied in English but clearly understood as shown in interpretation.

English II-9: *Afghanistan, as they saw it, was slipping away.*
French II-10: *Ils avaient l'impression que l'Afghanistan leur échappait.* The referential meaning of *as they saw it* here and now is not *à leurs yeux, selon eux*, or *d'après eux*, which would be correct language meaning equivalents but would referentially imply a mistaken, subjective assessment of the position. The referential meaning built up by cognitive complements is correctly *Ils avaient l'impression* because it shows the feeling of uncertainly that was theirs.

English III-11, 12: *For many months, the Administration had ignored the warning signals.*
French III-12, 13: *Pendant des mois, le Gouvernement s'était refusé à prendre au sérieux les avertissements qui se multipliaient.*

The language meaning of *ignore* can be rendered with many idioms, as is always the case with generic terms: *ignorer* (newly introduced in French with the English meaning), other wise: *choisir d'ignorer, ignorer délibérément, ne pas réagir, ne pas tenir compte de,* etc... The referential meaning here is translated: *se refuser à prendre au sérieux*, implying as it does in the original that the Administration did not believe that anything more serious would happen.

English III-15: *The Russians were massing their forces...*
French III-17, 18: first translation, rapidly corrected was given as: *Les Russes massaient des troupes à la frontière. Masser des troupes à la frontière* is a ready made sentence stored in the memory as an entity, probably evoked here because of the ressemblance of *massing* with *masser*; it was quickly corrected however because of the extra-linguistic memory that the Russians had brought in their troops by planes and helicopters from inside the Soviet Union; in a split second the cognitive awareness suggested another translation: *les Russes procédaient à des concentrations de troupes.*

The translation carried out here is based on an interpretation process which yields cognitive results. The interpretative process: emergence of single meanings or semantic features, and addition of extra-linguistic information, is mostly carried out at pre-conscious level, while the cognitive result is an awareness which, as such, can be paraphrased in different ways or translated into another language, There is always an interpretative process in acts of speech, be they written texts or minutely prepared discourses or impromptu speech, but it is particularly conspicuous in the latter where sounds leave littel trace in the memory as compared with the cognitive trace of interpreting. That cognitive trace then becomes all-important. It allows sentences to surface spontaneously and to hook up to each other on the basis of cognitive competence works hand in hand with language competence.

Thinking while speaking not only makes for an accord between prosodics and semantics but also between words chosen and things meant, principles stated and examples given, etc.

Once a communicative goal is in one's mind, cognitive competence allows for spontaneous build-up of ideas, while language competence releases speech-language as a behavioral response to cognitive activity. Units of meaning join together in a linear fashion, but their sequence is not premeditated; arguments do not follow neatly on each other as in written discourse; the reasoning is looser; individual points stem as much from the need to adjust or expand the meaning of a previous sentence as from the need for a tidy progression towards a final goal.

Impromptu speech is characterized by a constant interconnection between cognitive competence and language competence, between sense and prosodic, syntactic, lexical features. The Saussurian link between sounds and semantics, which is fundamental for language description, should not be applied as such to speeches. This link dissolves as soon as we open our mouths because whatever we mean to communicate, we can utter only sounds; and similarly the listener is reached by sounds only. Moreover the things we mean when uttering sounds, or the interpretation we give them as a listener, are drawn from the whole of our background knowledge, and not just from our knowledge of language; in speech we understand much more often referential meanings than language meanings, and therefore the link established is between sounds and *sense*.

Impromptu speech is the primary act of speech; it should stand first on the list of language studies as it is a natural communication act, involving cognitive activities on the part of both communication partners in addition to their language competence.

Oral translation is always impromptu as K. Déjean (1978) pointed out; it should as such stand first on the list of translation studies as it epitomizes the fundamentals of translating.

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